

Woodland Hills Commission on Youth Development and Learning

May 1, 2018

Background

- Formed by the WHSD Board of School Directors in June 2017 as a result of incidents that took place in the 2016-2017 SY
- Stated Goals-
 - comprehensive assessment of the current District systems that are in place for supporting the social and emotional development of our students
 - examining and assessing the District's capacity to institute the systemic changes that will be needed to create the frameworks that will be needed to address the inequities uncovered as a result of the incidents of the 16-17 school year.
 - surveying what are considered as 'best practices' across the spectrum of public school functions and then making recommendations with regard to which of these might best serve the students, their families, and the Woodland Hills community.

Background

- The Commission was not an investigative body. It was not formed or empowered to conduct any type of inquiry into the actions of District personnel, contracted staff, or students who were involved in any of the events that had taken place during the 16-17 school year or at any other time.
- Commission members could however ask any question or pursue any line of inquiry that was believed to be important.

Background

- Commission members were to be selected from two primary sources:
 - persons who lived within the community and who are outstanding in their commitment to the District as evidenced by prior work on behalf of the District and/or having a great interest or passion for the events that have led to the present situation. It was also essential to recruit persons from each of the three established voting regions within the Woodland Hills community.
 - persons who possessed expertise in public education and, in particular, were expert in the areas of supporting diverse populations of students or who were involved in programs that had a demonstrated success in supporting students from traditionally underserved communities.

Membership

Woodland Hills School District Commission on Youth Development and Learning	
Name	Affiliation
Dr. Jerry Zahorchak*	Former PA Secretary of Education/Educational Consultant
Karen Farmer – White*	Community Activist/Member State Board of Education
Reverend Robert Tedder	Chairman/Executive Director, Reach Up, Inc.
Reverend Richard Freeman, Sr., MSPC	Resurrection Baptist Church – Braddock
Reverend Richard Wingfield	Unity Baptist Church-Braddock/President of Greater Braddock Ministerial Association
McLelland Bernard	Retired Behavior Specialist – Intermediate School/Community Activist
Lee Davis	Alumni/Entrepreneur
Bahiyah Jefferson	Former Parent/Community Member
Larry Jefferson	Former Parent/Community Member
Chief Rian Wooten	Alumni/Chief of Police – Rankin
Judge Thomas Caulfield, Magisterial District 05-2-08	Magistrate: Jr./Sr. High School, Intermediate, Wilkins, Edgewood
William H. Price, III	President, Borough Council – Rankin
Anne Countouris	Parent/Business Owner, Drew's Family Restaurant
Summer Lee	Alumni/Civil Rights Attorney/Activist
Senator Jay Costa, 43 rd District	PA State Minority Representative
Tina Doose	Parent/President, Borough Council – Braddock
Dr. James Huguley, Ph.D.	Assistant Professor – University of Pittsburgh Center on Race & Social Problems School of Social Work
Gerald Smith	NAACP – Eastern Region
Jacquetta Rawlings	Parent
Assistant Chief Ellis Watson	Swissvale Borough Police Department
Jay Dworin	President, Borough Council- Churchill

Background

- A press conference was held at the Junior/Senior High School on July 14, 2017 and this was chaired by Dr. Zahorchak, Ms. Farmer White, and the District Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent. It was announced at that time that the Commission co-chairs hoped to produce a draft report of its recommendations by the Labor Day holiday. That target was not achieved of course, but the high quality and depth of the deliberations that ensued when the Commission began to meet more than justified taking the additional time that was needed to accomplish the important tasks that were before the team.

Meetings

July 10, 2017

July 27, 2017

August 10, 2017

August 22, 2017

September 7, 2017

September 14, 2017

November 16, 2017

December 14, 2017

March 1, 2018

April 3, 2018



Final Background Notes

- In general, the first meetings focused on how the District supported student emotional and social development. Particular interest was shown in how students coming from traditionally underserved populations were supported and what systems were in place to serve these especially vulnerable students. This was followed by several meetings devoted to exploring best practices for addressing the mental health needs of students in our communities.
- The second phase of the Commission's work focused on academic achievement within the District with special emphasis on comparative levels of performance between black students and their white peers. This was examined longitudinally, so that trends from Kindergarten through high school could be assessed. After this examination, the final meetings were devoted to exploring promising practices in career readiness education and in insuring that all students have access to the kind of education that will lead either to a successful college/technical or trade school experience or to meaningful employment after graduation from high school.

Recommendations

- The Commission arrived at four overarching goals. Within each of these overarching goals there are proposed a number of more specific actionable goals. These actionable goals are specific, concrete and measurable. Together they constitute the distilled evidence based recommendations of the Commission members. Within each of the four goals that will be reviewed here the Commission has drafted a series of specific objectives. Each of these objectives is then prioritized according to the following hierarchy:
- **Items which are important and need to be done urgently.**
- **Items which have significance and can be done, or are being done, without major cost or effort.**
- **Items which are important and should be done but do not require immediate action.**
- **Items are neither important or urgent.**

The Big 4 Goals

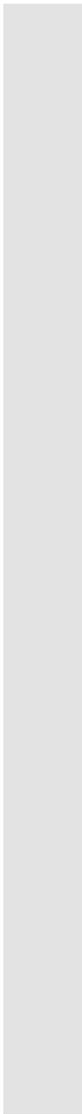
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- The Woodland Hills School District must make the positive development of *ALL* youth its most important priority moving forward into the future. This will be accomplished through appropriate professional development of all staff and through the implementation of those policies and practices that support this priority.
- The Woodland Hills School District must work to improve its engagement with the larger community beyond those who have direct interaction with the District. In this effort the District should consider partnering with an established agency, such as the United Way or one of the regional medical systems, to lead the community in a needs assessment focused on the developmental needs of children from birth to age 4 and also on the needs of all youth during the critical after school and summer time frames. This should then lead to a coordinated plan for improving or originating programs aimed at providing appropriate and needed opportunities and services for students and families from birth to post graduation.

The Big 4 Goals

- The goal of any school district is to prepare students for excellence in academic achievement. The benchmarks in that effort are varied and include standardized test measures that accord with provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and include the PSSA and Keystone Assessment tests. In addition, students should also demonstrate high levels of attendance and substantive levels of family engagement. At the secondary level there must also be a strong focus on preparing students for life after High School. This will include College readiness skills along with substantive opportunities to learn about and experience authentic career experiences.
- The Board of School Directors and the Administration of the Woodland Hills School District must work to establish trust relationships with the members of the Woodland Hills community. This will be accomplished through building transparent systems of governance that create high levels of support for the Board of School Directors and the District administration.

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 1A-** *Implement a professional development program that is intended to concretely support the positive development of youth within the Woodland Hills School District. This professional development will be aligned with concrete and measurable steps that are to be taken by the Woodland Hills School District in support of the belief that the positive development of our youth is of paramount importance.*
- **Objective 1-** Improve school climate through an intensive program of professional development on a restorative practices and restorative justice culture in each school. This will include the establishment of youth courts and other innovative disciplinary practices. (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 2-** The District must begin intensive staff training on the importance of understanding and countering the effects of implicit bias on African-American youth
- (Imp and Urgent)



Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 1A Con't**
 - **Objective 3-** The District must include professional development on the concept of social and emotional learning and development as part of its regular and ongoing professional education programming. An initial professional development experience on this concept must be identified and scheduled (Imp and Urge)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 1A Con't**
 - **Objective 4-** Examine the impact that various environmental and academic variables have on student learning and behaviors and incorporate these findings into any planning being done by the District that relates to facility renovation and/or construction. These would include, but would not be limited to, school size, schools within the school and career pathways or career academies. Additionally, the District should consider mandatory adoption of Universal Design for Learning principles in all renovation and construction plans. (Important but can wait)
 - **Objective 5-** The District should institute regular professional education programs targeted at building deep understanding of the key constructs underlying the concept of resiliency as it pertains to the emotional development of youth. Resiliency must become ingrained in its understanding and systemic in its application for all staff, professional and non-professional.
 - **(important and can be done easily)**

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 1B-** *The Woodland Hills School District must put into place those practices and policies that have as their primary purpose the promotion of systems designed to promote positive youth development for all students within the District. These practices must be research based and shown to be effective in diverse school populations*
- **Objective 1-** The District must immediately undertake a comprehensive evaluation of its current policies and practices with regard to the implementation and use of School Resource Officers. This should also include an assessment and inventory of the attitudes and beliefs of the current School Resource Officer cohort. It is recommended that the District consider retaining an external entity or advisor to help examine options for implementing other models for providing law enforcement services within the District. This could also include an option for considering the elimination of resource officers altogether. For informational purposes, a survey of how other school districts in Allegheny County implement school police and/or school resource officers has been attached as **Appendix D. (Most Important and Most Urgent of all)**

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 2-** The District should require the addition of an evidence based curriculum designed specifically to formalize the implementation of a Social and Emotional Learning program for all students. Examples of such a program could include but would not be limited to the PATHS program (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 3-** The District must immediately undertake a thorough and systematic review of all applicable Board policies to ensure that all foundational documents (i.e. policies, administrative regulations, Code of Conduct etc.) are aligned to the principles and aims of positive youth development. (Important and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 4-** The District must promptly begin an effort to establish partnerships with businesses, non-profit entities and faith based organizations in a concerted effort to encourage these communities to increase their participation in student programs. These can be programs aligned with defined career interests or they can be programs intended for the pro-social development of all youth. The scope and scale are only limited by imagination. It will be particularly important to include businesses and other agency partners that are owned or operated by minorities and especially those owned or operated by African-Americans who do business within the Woodland Hills School District. (Important and urgent but should be doable easily)
- **Objective 5-** The District should take steps to implement a Youth Court framework as a means to facilitate an accelerated implementation of a Restorative Practices based culture within the secondary schools of the District. (Important and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 6-** The District should consider amending its graduation requirements to encourage students to become involved in community service programs. A good example would include increased participation in groups such as the Rotary International's Interact Clubs. But this is only an example. Efforts must be made to ensure that the District partners with community and service organizations that focus on underserved communities and to also ensure that such participation also include groups that have a majority of members who are African-American. At a minimum, students should be actively encouraged to become involved in at least one extra-curricular activity as a means of building a sense of ownership among all students. This could be accomplished through amending the current District policies on graduation requirements. (Important but should easily doable)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 2-** *The Woodland Hills School District must work to improve its engagement with the larger community beyond those who have direct interaction with the District. In this effort the District should consider partnering with an established agency, such as the United Way or one of the regional medical systems, to lead the community in a needs assessment focused on the developmental needs of children from birth to age 4 and also on the needs of all youth during the critical after school and summer time frames. This should then lead to a coordinated plan for improving or originating programs aimed at building programming for pre-school students along with improving recreational and career building experiences for students during their Pre-K through 12th grade years.*
- **Objective 1-** The District should work to develop a collaborative partnership that shares responsibility with the community to develop a strong short and long range plan dedicated to the improvement of coordinated efforts among non-profits, businesses, faith based organizations and the schools to ensure that families receive information, training and support to help them rear children who have good self-discipline, reading readiness and good physical health. This latter effort can be achieved through working with groups such as the Nurse Family Partnership. (Imp and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Object 2-** The District needs to ensure that its policies and administrative regulations provide equipment, facilities and support for community-based programs that support Woodland Hills students (Imp and Urgent)
- **Objective 3-** The District should investigate the feasibility of offering universal, high quality, pre-school education to all students in the Woodland Hills community. (Imp and Urgent)
- **Objective 4-** The District should consider carefully the hiring of a dedicated Public Relations Director or the establishment of a Public Relations Department as a means of keeping community members at all levels informed and engaged with the District. Other models for providing public relations services may also be considered. (Imp and Urgent but also not urgent and Important Members split)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 5-** The District must make a significant commitment to building and maintaining strong community collaborations. Up until this point efforts such as this have been handled by central or building level administrators or, in some cases, even to members of the professional staff or to volunteers. This has resulted in many cases of missed opportunities or opportunities that were not fully supported by the District. The importance of maintaining vigorous and effective community engagement is such that the District should consider the feasibility of retaining a full time Family and Community Engagement Coordinator. (Important but can be done easily)
- **Objective 6-** The District should work with the Department of Labor's Workforce Investment Board along with the Board's Youth Council to incorporate career training with the Woodland Hills educational program (Important but can be done easily)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 3A-** *The goal of any school district is to prepare students for excellence in academic achievement. The first benchmark in that effort is to ensure that students leave third grade reading on grade level and performing at proficiency on the PSSA. Students should also demonstrate high attendance and substantive levels of family engagement*
- **Objective 1-** District Administration should establish goals for attendance, language arts and mathematics for five, four and three-year periods. These goals should be set based on the ultimate aim of reducing the achievement gap by 50%. (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 2-** District administrators should analyze the alignment of District Math, Language Arts, Science and other curricula to assure that all materials are aligned to the PA Core Standards. This information should be distributed publicly to all members of the school community. (Important but will take time)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 3-** The District should undertake additional efforts to publicly describe its implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports. This will include but not be limited to PBIS, Counseling, Tutoring and other supports. Having accomplished this the District should collect and collate data on the use of these supports and make them available to the Board on at least a quarterly basis (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 4-** The District must complete a comprehensive reassessment of its Pre K through 3 curricula to ensure that all materials are culturally relevant and employ race neutral pedagogies and supporting materials (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 5-** The District should collect and collate five-year historical data on the performance of students in the early (i.e. Pre K to 3) grades. These data should include performance on local assessments as well as PSSA data. It should also include attendance and discipline disaggregated for ethnicity, gender, transiency and other dimensions. (Important and Done Easily)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 6-** The District should plan for adding the teaching staff necessary to achieve a student / teacher ratio of no more than 15:1 for classes in grades Kindergarten, First and Second. Accomplishing this strict ration will allow teachers in those grades to provide effective identification of and intervention for students who demonstrate an early need for remediation- particularly in the areas of language arts and basic math skills. While admittedly a cost driver it is also believed that establishing and maintaining such a ratio will ultimately reduce costs associated with providing special education and other services to these students later in their academic career. (Important and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 3B-** *The goal of any school district is to prepare students for excellence in academic achievement. The Woodland Hills School District must take steps to ensure the students exiting the 'basic education' (i.e. grades 4 to 9) are performing at grade level as measured by PSSA, Keystone or other assessment.*
- **Objective 1-** District Administration should establish goals for students in grades 4 to 9 for attendance, language arts, science and mathematics for five, four and three-year periods. These goals should be set based on the ultimate aim of reducing the achievement gap by 50%. (For information on the Achievement Gap see (Important and done without difficulty)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 2-** District administrators should analyze the alignment of District Math, Language Arts, Science and other curricula in grades 4 - 9 to assure that all materials are aligned to the PA Core Standards. This information should be distributed publicly to all members of the school community. (important but can be done without great difficulty)
- **Objective 3-** The District must complete a comprehensive reassessment of its Grade 4 through 9 curricula to ensure that all materials are culturally relevant and employ race neutral pedagogies and supporting materials. (Important and urgent)
- **Objective 4-** The District should collect and collate five-year historical data on the performance of students in the 'basic education' (i.e. 4 to 9) grades. These data should include performance on local assessments as well as PSSA data. It should also include attendance and discipline disaggregated for ethnicity, gender, transiency and other dimensions (Important and can be done without great difficulty)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 3C-** *The Woodland Hills School District must redesign its 'upper division' (i.e. 10-12) grades into a 'Pathways' model. These Pathways should include tracks for students who have mastered the state's basic education content as measured by the Keystone or equivalent assessment. Specific tracks can include, but won't be limited to, a dual enrollment /AP track, Career and Technical Education programs and International Baccalaureate options*
- **Objective 1-** Career Pathways that have already been developed as part of this goal should be supported by Board policies which ensure that each career pathway track is an open enrollment program and that, further, administration will monitor enrollments to ensure that students from traditionally underrepresented groups are given equal opportunity to access challenging content without regard to past academic performance. (Important and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 2-** Career Pathways that focus on Career and Technical Education created under this goal should culminate with an industry recognized certificate (at the state or national level) being awarded to the student. Students matriculating into any of the Career Pathways and especially the Dual Enrollment/AP pathway must have the opportunity to earn substantial college credit up to and including the possibility of earning an Associate's Degree upon graduation. Examples of recognized credentials could include, but would not be limited to: Safe Serv (culinary arts), Child Care Manager, Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), Microsoft or A+ computer certification, or a Pennsylvania Skills Certificate. For students engaged in advanced academic pathway the option to earn an International Baccalaureate certification will also be desirable. (Important but will take time and some expense)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 3-** The District must provide historical data to the public on past performance of District students in these areas and set goals for the number of students who will be expected to complete an industry credential or earn college credit up to an Associate's Degree. (important but will take time)
- **Objective 4-** The District must complete a comprehensive reassessment of its Grade 9 through 12 curricula to ensure that all materials are culturally relevant and employ race neutral pedagogies and supporting materials (Important and urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Goal 4-** *The Board of School Directors and the Administration of the Woodland Hills School District must work to establish trust relationships with the members of the Woodland Hills community. This will be accomplished through building transparent systems of governance that create high levels of support for the Board of School Directors and the District administration*
- **Objective 1-** The Board should authorize the continued operation of the Commission for the purposes of monitoring the implementation of the goals established in this report. The Commission will serve as an advisory council to the Board and will act in a confidential capacity with members pledging non-disclosure in its counsel to the Board. In other words, the members of the Commission/Advisory Council will provide input, advice and guidance to the Board but will not make public pronouncements or statements as that would create a competing governance structure and this would be counterproductive to the intent of the Commission/Advisory Council. (Important and Urgent)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 2-** The Board should develop a policy that guides District administration on the recruitment, application screening, interviewing and recommendation of candidates for positions within the District. This will also include a process for ensuring that all candidates employed by the District embrace the values and beliefs needed to work productively and successfully in the diverse environment that is the Woodland Hills School District. Special emphasis is to be placed on the recruitment and retention of qualified minority candidates (Important and Urgent) See Appendices F, G, H

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 3-** A root cause of the issues that have brought the Woodland Hills School District to its present state is the lack of formal commitment to the ideas of equity and equitable outcomes for all students. Whether this lack of commitment is real or perceived it is, nonetheless, operative in the minds of many of its residents both African-American and Caucasian. It would be difficult to identify concrete actions or policies that demonstrate the organizational focus on achieving the equitable outcomes the District was founded to provide. It is essential that the District formalize its commitment to achieving equity in all areas of operation. The Commission believes that this can best be accomplished by creating the position of Equity Director or Equity Officer as a cabinet level position within the District's administrative framework (Important and Urgent) (Job Description under Appendix E

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 4-** The Board should undertake a comprehensive review and update off ALL Board policies to assure that all these foundational documents are in alignment and serve the best interests of the students of the District. (Important and Urgent)
- **Objective 5-** The Board should develop policy that formalizes the alignment of all recommendations outlined in this report at every grade level and within each building. In other words, there needs to be a policy or administrative regulation that describes how programs will be monitored for alignment at all levels (Important and urgent)
- **Objective 6-** The Board of School Directors should work to develop a new and simplified vision for the Woodland Hills School District and should work to vividly describe the goals it has established and the metrics for measuring progress towards those goals. Those goals should include the goals and objectives outlined here as well as other goals developed henceforth. All of these should be directly aimed at ensuring the success of students and staff within the District. (Important but will need time)

Key Goals and Objectives

- **Objective 7-** As part of an ongoing commitment to excellence in governance, the Board of Directors must commit to continuous professional learning on its own part. This should include use of external educational providers such as the Carver Institute or the National School Boards Association. Collaborations with the Pennsylvania School Board Association (PSBA) are also encouraged but other resources, such as those outlined above, must also be included as they are likely to be more objective and honest with the Board. In addition, the Board should consider investing in top-level developmental experiences for its highest-ranking administrators. This could include the Vistage Executive Training model (Important but will take time)
- **Objective 8-** As a result of the events of the 2016-2017 school year, the Woodland Hills School District is facing a number of civil suits brought by parents of the students involved in those incidents. Recognizing that the District has an obligation to handle this with necessary due diligence, it would nevertheless be in the best overall interests of the District to see these suits resolved in as timely a fashion as possible. The Commission believes that these suits should be settled as quickly as possible. (important but does require fiscal and legal due diligence)